

## Future National Upland Rural Development Measures

A range of different stakeholders, including farming organisations, environmental organisations and government bodies involved in agriculture and nature conservation attended a workshop on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2012 to determine the best way to support farming in Ireland's Uplands under the next Rural Development Programme (RDP). One outcome of the workshop was the formation of a working group and wider consultation group who will develop a proposal which will include measures that could be incorporated into the next Rural Development Plan.

One of the three objectives in the European Union's Rural Development Policy post-2013 is the sustainable management of natural resources<sup>1</sup>. The achievement of this objective is to be pursued through six Union priorities, including through "restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems dependent on agriculture"<sup>2</sup>, focusing on biodiversity (including Natura 2000 and High Nature Value farming) and the state of European landscapes. The October 2011 proposal on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) outlines the range of measures available to Member States including agri-environment schemes, thematic sub-programmes, co-operation measures and advisory services. The Commission's proposal states that Agri-environment schemes are to give specific attention to the additional needs of farming systems that are of high nature value<sup>3</sup>.

Ireland's uplands make up the majority of our High Nature Value Farmland and represent a significant proportion of Ireland's Natura 2000 network. Current information from the assessment of the status of habitats and species listed in the EU Habitats Directive, university research work, local case studies and anecdotal evidence indicates that there are specific issues that need to be addressed. Targeted measures are essential to ensure Ireland meets its obligations under the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and its commitments under the EAFRD in supporting this type of farming and maintaining its biodiversity value. Existing agri-environment measures have not been well targeted towards the uplands and have taken a "one size fits all" approach. This approach, which is not unique to Ireland, was recently criticised by the European Court of Auditors who called for more targeting of agri-environmental payments. The European Commission has accepted that better targeting of agri-environment payments is necessary and is envisaged in the framework of the CAP post-2013. In order to improve targeting in Ireland, future agri-environment policies and schemes should include a national upland agri-environment programme that is targeted at high nature value farmland and the associated farming systems, both within and outside designated areas. It should have clear objectives, fit in with other EU priorities for Rural Development and incorporate any other measures, such as farm advisory and additional measures that are necessary to maintain the high nature value farming systems in the uplands. Such a targeted approach will have numerous associated benefits, as sustainable management of the uplands will have positive implications for biodiversity, carbon storage, carbon offsetting against agricultural intensification in other areas within Ireland, water

---

<sup>1</sup> Article 4 of the European Commission's Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on support for Rural Development by the European Agricultural fund for Rural Development.

<sup>2</sup> Article 5, (4) (a).

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 28, page 17.

quality, flood mitigation and tourism. These outcomes will all contribute to the Rural Development Programme's objectives and priorities.

### **Targeting an Uplands Scheme**

A scheme should be targeted at upland farmers who are actively managing land that has a high percentage of semi-natural vegetation or who are willing to recommence farming on abandoned semi-natural land. Such land should include areas of dry heath, wet heath, blanket bog, semi-natural grasslands and other habitat types associated with extensive upland systems.

The nature of Ireland's Atlantic climate means that "upland" vegetation can occur down to sea level, therefore altitude should not be used to define eligibility. Specific evidence-based eligibility criteria will be developed.

### **Scheme details**

It is proposed that a specific agri-environment scheme for the uplands should be developed for incorporation into Ireland's Rural Development Plan. The scheme will focus on the maintenance and re-introduction of traditional sustainable farming practices to restore, preserve and enhance ecosystems dependent on agriculture. It will also incorporate enhancement measures required to meet the programme's objectives. The biodiversity requirements of the scheme will go beyond those required under Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). It will also differ from the existing LFA scheme as it will be targeted to semi-natural areas with specific measures to enhance their condition.

The proposal is to formulate an outputs-driven scheme, where those farmers whose farmland habitats are in the best condition will achieve higher returns. The scheme should include a works programme that will identify what work is necessary to improve the condition of the habitats. Examples of such works include targeted grazing levels for specific objectives, removal of scrub, bracken or alien plants, mosaic burning etc. The Scheme would need to include a capital works programme to finance the associated work required.

### **Monitoring details**

A critical part of the scheme would be the inclusion of ecological monitoring of its outputs to identify any necessary changes to farming practices so that the Scheme meets its objectives. It is proposed that this ecological monitoring would be separate from inspection for non-compliance issues, instead it would measure the public benefits achieved.

### **Next steps**

In order to move this collaborative proposal forward, it needs to be incorporated into the developing RDP and considered in the broader context of the RDP's ex-ante evaluation. The key role of the ex-ante evaluation is to contribute to developing an RDP that is both in line with the needs identified for Ireland but also with EU-wide priorities. The stakeholders referred to above have nominated and established a working group whose members have expertise on agriculture, environmental and policy matters to develop the proposal for an Uplands Scheme that can be fully incorporated into Ireland's RDP under the Agri-environment Programme, and other relevant articles.

**Contributing Organisations** (Consultation Group):

Irish Farmers Association

Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association

Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association

Macra na Feirme

Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (National Parks and Wildlife Service)

Department of Environment, Community and Local Government

Teagasc

The Heritage Council

European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism

Birdwatch Ireland

Irish Peatland Conservation Council

Irish Uplands Forum

Wicklow Uplands Council

Mountaineering Ireland

Golden Eagle Trust

National Association of Regional Game Councils

Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners Association

Irish Landowners Organisation

Sligo Institute of Technology (Department of Environmental Science)

BEC Consultants

Burren Farming for Conservation Programme

South Kerry Development Partnership